
Law and Public Governance in the Ibibio Traditional Society

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Abstract

This paper examines law and public governance in the traditional Ibibio society of present day Nigeria. It notes that for a community to operate effectively, requisite institutions must be designed to direct its affairs. In the Ibibio traditional society, three relevant governmental institutions passed through series of processes and acceptable conventions, and were handed over from one generation to the other. The institutions, engendered law and order and also facilitated good governance. Like in other African traditional societies, the British colonial rule overthrew these institutions and imposed alien system. Although some Eurocentric writers denied the existence of relevant traditional governmental institutions in Ibibioland and other African societies to justify the colonial imposition, a study of the Ibibio traditional society proves contrary to such perspective. Findings reveal that the challenge of leadership currently confronting the Ibibio nation in particular and the Nigerian state in general, can to some extent be attributed to the alien system imposed on the people. The paper suggests the integration of some of these traditional values and institutions in modern governance to achieve the much desired good governance that could enhance nation building. The study adopts a historical analytical methodology.

Introduction

The Ibibio people live in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria and are considered the fourth largest ethnic group in the country (Offiong, 1991). They appear to have been one of the earliest inhabitants of South Eastern Nigeria. It has been estimated that they have lived in their present abode from “very early times” (Jones, 1962, Noah, 1994). The Ibibio are said to have remained up to the beginning of the colonial period, a segmentary or stateless society. That is, they had no centralized political organization controlled by a powerful chief or ruler like the Oba of Benin, Asantehne of Ashanti or Kabaka of Buganda (Ekong, 2001) but were divided into small politically equivalent and independent units. The largest socio-political unit in the pre-colonial Ibibioland is said to have been the village. Above the village was the clan and each clan remained a republic (Ina, 2004).

However, Ina (2004) opines that the views on the Ibibio political organization, by some European and African writers seem to have been based on their observation of the general political structure of the administration of the present day South Eastern and some parts of South-South zone of Nigeria and not on detailed studies of the Ibibio socio-political system.

This study seeks to establish the fact that even though the general political structure of the Ibibio society before the imposition of colonial rule might be described as segmentary, there were enduring mechanisms that dispensed law and order and also engendered good governance. Indeed, the use of the word “traditional” to describe the Ibibio society, means that the institutions discussed originated from the state and refers to what is aboriginal, foundational or indigenous. It

serves the purpose of distinguishing the institutions from foreign institutions that have been brought by foreign rulers (Esen, 1987). Put in another way, the Ibibio people were born into traditional society and the structures were handed down to them as their heritage.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction, section two examines the concept of law and public governance in the Ibibio traditional society, section three discusses the Ibibio political organization, section four considers the role of social institutions in the maintenance of law and public governance in the Ibibio traditional society, section five is the conclusion.

Law and Public Governance in the Ibibio Traditional Society

The term government has been defined as an organization through which the state manifests its will, issues its commands and conducts its affairs. In other words, government entails the exercise of authority or institutionalized power over a state, district or group by a body or successive body of persons. Political control or government is therefore, ultimately instituted by the use or possibility of the use of “force” with the control of instruments of such coercion into the hands of differentiated political statuses (Ekong, 2003).

Power is a necessary social institution not only because human beings are intrinsically political animals, but also because of the need to control the activities and behaviour of men and so maintain a well-ordered society. Also, because of the society’s unequal distribution of resources (natural and man-made), there is a need for an institutional arrangement under which the resources available within a particular geographical area could be shared or utilized for the good of all the peoples within such area. The government institution has therefore, been found to be the most appropriate body for carrying out this function (Ekong, 2003).

According to Ukpong (2007), in any traditional society, the political community consists of a union of living blood relations, the dead relations or ancestors, the generations yet unborn and the gods of the community. It is a sort of a spiritual commonwealth because it was believed that the gods of the community and the ancestors were parties to its foundation and so have continuity interest in its well-being. Where strangers were absorbed and incorporated into the community, kinship as well as ritual relationship was built for them with the aim of making the old rule to continue to work. The gods and the ancestors were believed to have handed down in remote antiquity, a basic charter of life or rule of proper conduct or customs (Dike and Ajayi, 1969). This made non-conformity and disobedience to laid-down rules an affront to the spiritual component of the society. For this reason, difficult cases were passed down to the ancestors and gods through the medium of oracle, ordeals or *mbiam* (an instrument used in oath-taking). The fear of what the ancestors and the gods would dictate on a particular issue was an ever-present consideration and one of the most powerful sanctions in Ibibio traditional life. The maintenance of law and order in pre-colonial society was therefore, a religious as well as political duty. Religion, law and politics were inextricably intertwined, each dovetailed into the other. Offender were punished for their misdeed and often he had to sacrifice to the gods and ancestors to appease their wrath for an offence allegedly committed (Ukpong, 2007).

As a legislative body, the village in-council made few laws since most of the laws of the community took the form of customs, mores and ethos handed down from generation to generation. Ibibio traditional society, like traditional societies elsewhere in the world, did not always emphasise legislation. The village in-council however, could make few laws such as: finding labour for a given task such as the construction of a new roads or maintenance of the streets, the construction of village hall, the sanitation of sources of water or streams, keeping of

domestic animals under control particularly during the farming season; preventing the first fruits from early and random plucking; regulating the fishing season; and imposition of laws on farmlands during certain days. Such laws, were quasi-administrative in nature because villages had no paid bureaucracy such as police or army but office holders such as chiefs and priests, had privileges or fringe benefits (Ukpong, 2007).

Noah (1980) in his studies of the Ibibio distinguished between two classes of laws among the Ibibio. One class consists of laws which might be called ordinary human laws for which appropriate punishment existed e.g. stealing, lying and assault. The second class consists of laws whose breach was held to be not only illegal but also an offence against supernatural power and particularly against the land. Among such laws were crimes like incest and offence against in-laws and grand-children which attracted merited natural or supernatural sanctions. Here, the belief was that certain actions such as those described above, attracted misfortune to the individual in which case, the offender had to perform ritual acts of purification through which the effects of the wrongful acts could be obviated.

The Ibibio Political Organization

The political structure of the Ibibio society was based on social organization and consisted of six administrative divisions augmented by clubs. The first administrative division was known as *idip ete*, literally, the father's womb, but which means in this context a man, his sons, his brothers and his half-brothers, which coincided with the family unit of the Western world. In the *idip ete* political division, the father and husband was the political boss. He, together with his senior wife and eldest son, his senior wife, half-brothers and a few other intelligent members of the family, constituted an ad-hoc council where cases among members were tried. Although their decisions were not upheld by legal sanctions, they were backed by the norms of the Ibibio society, and were promptly obeyed (Udo, 1983).

The next administrative unit was the *ufok*, literally a house, but also a collection of families which trace their origin to one father. The increase in population of one particular *idip ete* necessitated the formation of an *ufok*. The oldest man among the members was the head of the unit. Together with other senior members constituted the *ufok* council that meet occasionally to exercise judicial duties and attended to appeals from different *idip ete* that made up the *ufok*. Udo (1983) notes that the greatest weapon for the enforcement of their decisions was the threat of selling the culprit into slavery or ostracization of the recalcitrant member of the unit.

Ekpuk (extended family) was the third political unit and refers to a collection of *ufok* which traced their origins to one father. This was the highest political administrative unit of each village. It exercised political, economic, social and religious functions. The oldest man in each *ekpuk* was the head who co-function with the heads of *idip ete* and *ufok* met regularly and for specific purposes. Apart from political functions which included the settlement of cases between members of the extended family the head of extended family also kept the ancestral shrines which gave him a religious or what anthropologists call "a ritual status". The economic functions of the *ekpuk-in* council included the annual sharing of farmlands to adult male of the *ekpuk*. On the social aspects, the council controlled the behaviour of every member of *ekpuk* and dispute no matter how trivial was allowed to be taken to the village council without being cleared by members of the *ekpuk* council (Udo, 1983, Umo, 1991, Ukpong, 2007).

Idung (village) being the fourth level of political organization consisted of a collection of *ekpuk* which varied in number from village to village. One of the *ekpuk* was generally regarded as senior to the rest because its members traced their descent to the first settler and founder of the

village. The village was headed by *Obong idung*, who administered the village with his council members from the different *ekpuk*. The village council members constituted the executive arm of government. Its economic functions included fixing the period when certain farmlands and palm fruits should be cultivated. It exercised judicial functions on cases involving debt, bride-price defamations of character, adultery and so on (Ekong 2001).

The next level was the *oduk*, which means the village group or sub-clan. The oldest village in the group was the parent of the group while the oldest chief in the parent village of the group was the head of the group, assisted by other chiefs in the group. The group also had a council which tried cases brought from the respective villages that belonged to the group. The apex political administrative division was the *ikpaisong* (clan). According to Udo (1983) *ikpaisong* represented a collection of village groups which corresponded to what the British administrators referred to as “clan”. *Ikpaisong* claimed common ancestor and had one common totem and deity. The unit was headed by traditional head which was mutually selected by the villages of the group.

The Role of Social Institutions in the Maintenance of Law and Public Governance in the Ibibio Traditional Society

Social institutions were very significant to the lives of the Ibibio people as they guided their morals, behaviour and mode of interactions. The institutions were of numerous types with their own laid down rules and regulations guiding their members. Such institutions existed for the men, women and youths. Though not all the members of the community joined these social institutions, their activities strongly affected the people as a whole. Most of these social institutions were secret in nature and included; *ekpo*, *idiong*, *ekpri akata*, *atat*, *ebre*, and *mbopo*, to mention but a few. Secret societies assisted in stabilizing the Ibibio community life. These societies were not secret in the sense of crime syndicate or under-world organizations, they were secret in the sense that they had certain rights, rituals and ceremonies which were exclusively limited to and practiced only by their members or initiates. Some of their rituals and ceremonies were even unknown to non-members and were not performed in their presence (Umo, 1991).

For some times now, people have shared diverse conceptions about secret societies, while some claim that they “were a cunning device for perpetuating conservatism in Ibibioland”. According to these views, radical or sweeping changes in the socio-political structure of the society were hampered (Etukudo, 1986). Another school of thought believes that the activities of these secret societies in Ibibioland rather than acting as obstacles, served as engines and dynamics for enhancing social and political development in the society. According to Etukudo (1984), there was a general conviction in the traditional Ibibio society that a boy could not develop into a man naturally if left in his mother’s care. Thus, the enrolment of a young Ibibio man into a secret society of adult males was viewed as a necessity.

The initiation of the young into the secret societies required the fulfillment of some traditional requirements and payment of some appropriate fees. A very important feature of those secret societies was the idea of secrecy in the context of an association meeting. Members were taught not to divulge certain information to outsiders but to keep them secret.

Some of the secret societies and their responsibilities in the society are now discussed.

(i) Ekpo Nyoho

The term *ekpo* means “ghost” or “ancestor”. Before the establishment of Western type of government, *ekpo nyoho* was found in all parts of Ibibioland and was regarded as very important

in Ibibio traditional society. *Ekpo* society originated as a result of the common belief of the people about life after death and personalized the ancestors who were deemed to come back to earth during the *ekpo* season, to regulate the affairs of men in accordance with the code of conduct earlier laid down by the ancestors (Udoma, 1987).

Fadeye underscores the above assertion thus:

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, one finds the continuing relevance of the dead to the life of the present and of future generations. It is expressed in the belief that each community was founded by an ancestor...that whatever the status or possessions of the community, they were owed to the ancestors, and that the ancestors had established for all time, the basic charter of life...the fear of what the ancestors would say was an ever-present consideration and one of the most powerful sanctions in African societies (Fad eye, 2010: 18)

As an instrument of social control, all laws of the land were passed and enforced by the authority of *ekpo*. The institution was also adopted as a social mechanism for the administration of justice. *Ekpo* checked crimes such as stealing, adultery, prostitution and murder. The society ridiculed deviants against the norms of the society and had words of praise for illustrious members of the community. In some areas, it was used as an agent for the collection of fines and debts from stubborn persons in the community. In times of war, it was the duty of the members of the *ekpo* to fight for the village or clan under the command of the village head who was mandatorily an initiate of *ekpo*. Dictatorship in politics was unthinkable because of the in-built machinery for the division of power. The annual activities of the *ekpo* usually began in the first week of August of each year with the activities alternating between two and three weeks (Udo, 1983).

During this period of activities, *ekpo* laws affected all the members of the community as acts of violence were prohibited and defaulters subjected to pay fines such as fowl, money and drinks. Also, Women were restricted from beholding the sight of *ekpo* masquerades and they were advised to go out with men for security.

(ii) **Idiong Society**

The *idiong* cult has been described as a secret society of diviners which operated throughout the Ibibioland, and its members were viewed as a “guild of seers”. In the pre-colonial period, *idiong* served not only a social function but also performed some critical political functions. The society provided the most powerful means of checking crimes and its drastic measures against offenders helped in reducing crimes like witchcraft, murder and stealing and so on. It operated as a governing council of the villages and was the most revered of all the secret social institutions in every clan. The authority of the society was felt everywhere and its decisions were binding. While *ekpo* acted as the instrument for the execution of policies, *idiong* cult served as the decision making body, although the society also had the means of executing its decisions. The authority of the society came to overshadow the powers of the village heads during the pre-colonial period (Etukudo, 1986).

In the Ibibio traditional society, the rich and powerful members of the society considered it as a mark of prestige to join the society. At this period, nobody could exercise much authority except through the *idiong* society and because of its significant political role, the village and clan heads could not be crowned except they were members of the *idiong* society. Their activities also served as a check on the tyranny of the village and clan heads who could be dethroned if they performed below the acceptable standard.

Idiong had the authority to administer capital punishment over cases of witchcraft and murder of a person. It was the custodian of the customs of the clan and ensured that the authority of every ruler was upheld. It was from the instruction of *idiong* society that authority was given out for sale out of any recalcitrant citizen into slavery. As a result of the sensitive role of *idiong* in the Ibibio traditional society, its rules and regulations were more stringent than those of the other secret societies like *ekpo*, and *ekong*. Above all, members were bound to an oath of secrecy on decisions and activities of the society upon initiation. There was insistence on high moral standards among members as they were expected to set a pace that should be followed by members of the community. Discipline was therefore greatly upheld while betrayal of trust by any member was taken seriously and punishment could be very drastic. Also members of the societies were guided by a whole range of taboos during the period of their annual activities and such rules and regulations affected the whole community (Etukudo, 1986).

(iii) **Ekpri Akata**

Ekpri Akata in the modern sense existed as the village secret agent regarded by all as a ghost that came to the earth in the night. Whatever crimes people committed in secret each year, *ekpri akata* would reveal to everyone in the village. For example, on such nights *ekpri akata* would reveal to everyone in the village by mentioning the names of all thieves, what they had stolen and from whom. Also, *ekpri akata* would expose all the women and men who committed adultery. Since *ekpri akata* was regarded as a ghost its story or information was regarded as being true (Ekong, 2001).

No one could take action in court against it because soon after giving out its information, it vanished and no one could touch or handle “a ghost”. However, the accused person could prove his or her innocence of the charges made by the *ekpri akata* through oath-taking before everyone at the village square. *Ekpri akata* was the “ghost” or messenger of the deity of the land. Ibibio tradition forbade murder, secret poisoning of other people and habitual theft among others as instructed by the Supreme God.

(iv) **Age and Gender Groups**

The term “age group” is used in most parts of Africa to describe a set of people born around the same period or within a period of two years of each other and membership of the group was for life, unless one was expelled on grounds of misdemeanour. Each age group had its own codes of conduct and also served as a handy unit for the division of communal labour. In the pre-colonial period, every member of a village community knew members of his age grade in various fields of activity. The Ibibio people were very conscious of their social status, arising from their ages, hence, in some villages, there were in most cases, 4-5 age grades. Also for the purpose of identification, such age grade had a name. In addition, each grade also had a code of conduct and its own symbol, in the form of a modern flag. The names of the age grades varied from place to place and reflected its functions, aspirations, age, behaviour patterns, and moral code (Ukpong, 2009).

Ukpong (2009) notes further that “the age classes form an essential link in the chain of government and without them the administration could hardly be carried out”. All age grades had their own codes of conduct. Offences such as theft, adultery, flippancy and divulging of official secrets constituted breaches of their codes. Age grades also settled quarrels among their members, thereby reducing the number of cases that could have gone to the village council. Offenders were fined and in extreme cases, ostracized, while appeals could be made from one

junior grade to a higher one. In the case of theft, the particular age grade of the offender consulted the other age grades and the village authorities.

Finally, on a certain day, the offender was seized, stripped naked and had his body smeared with charcoal. He was then paraded along the streets of the village and neighboring villages and market place, with the stolen article tied to his or her neck. The offender was forced to dance round those places, while being flogged. It was unmitigated brutality inflicted on the culprit in the name of justice. The offender was thereafter suspended from his age grade for a number of months or years after which case could be reviewed if appealed. Fines were imposed for re-admission into the group, though the person had lost his credibility and respect (Ukpong, 2009).

Besides the judicial function, the age grade system facilitated community works. For example, during construction of a village hall, a particular age grade could be asked to supply mats; another, bamboos; and another, building sticks and so on. In the event of a festival or celebration involving the entire village, an age grade could be asked to supply yam; another age grade could provide palm wine; and so on while the women would be asked to supply condiments for cooking the food. Age grades also served as avenues for launching development funds by the community. Whenever they were called upon to assist the village council, age grades readily responded. Sometimes, there was keen competition as a particular age grade endeavored to contribute more than the other.

The age grade also provided mutual assistance to members in times of need. For instance, if a particular member was in need of a wife, his colleagues engaged themselves in looking for a suitable girl or woman for him to marry and also contributed money to support their colleague. Also, a particular age grade took charge of musical entertainment on the day of the marriage. Members of a particular age grade performed reciprocal labour services to their members in turn. Women assisted such as weeding in the farm as well as planting crops. The men assisted their members in clearing bush for farming and in planting of crops. Men assisted their members in clearing bushes for farming and planting of crops, such as yam, building of houses and fences around compounds (Akpan, 2016).

The age grade was some sort of an educational institution to its members because it inculcated in each member the pattern of behaviour of a particular society. Within the age grade, each member learnt to engage in activities such as climbing of oil palm trees to harvest the fruits, swimming, entrapping of animals and fishing while others members also got engaged in physical exercises such as wrestling. In the olden days, it should be noted, wrestling was the counterpart of modern-day football.

Age grades also performed executive and administrative functions. The youthful age grades were generally in charge of enforcing the decisions of the village authorities. If one failed or stayed away from community work, failed to pay fine imposed on him, age grades, similar to law enforcement agencies, would forcefully break into compound of the culprit, seized items or property (including domestic animals) and sold such property for the payment of the fine imposed on the culprit. If the property or animal seized, belonged to another person other than the offender, the offender was obliged to pay compensation to the owner. The functions and impact of age group in Ibibioland have dwindled drastically in recent times, as a result of Western legal and judicial entrenchment, thus, the introduction of the alien system has supplanted the and authority of age groups, thereby rendering them obsolete. However, some still exist as voluntary informal groups in most parts of Ibibioland (Ukpong, 2009).

(v) Women's Governmental Institutions

Apart from grouping the population on age basis, Ibibio people had a number of social organizations based on sex and differentiations. Among these, all female groups were very important and included groups like, *ebre*, *iban ison esit* (strong willed, hard hearted women), *iban isong idung* (women of the land), *assian ubo ikpa*, *ndok ufok ebe* and so on. These social groups played very important roles in moral education, legal, mutual aid and preservation of the rights of the female sex (Edemekong, 2000).

(a) Iban Ison Esit

Iban ison esit (strong-willed, heart hearted women), was a female organization or club, concerned with meting out punishment on those who abused the sexual anatomy of women. Any person, whether male or female, who used obscene language on a woman, was severely punished by *Iban ison esit*. The punishment included house arrest, severe fines and curses. Offenders, who could withstand the wrath of the enraged women, sometimes fled the village community for their dear life. *Iban isno esit* operated on ad-hoc basis in the villages (Udo, 1983).

(b) Iban Ison Idung

This organization forms the governing council for regulating the affairs of women in every village. For instance, any man who maltreated his wife or let loose his animals to devour the women's crops, could be summoned to the women's council and punished appropriately. *Iban ison idung* could place a ban on the cutting of firewood or the harvesting of cassava and lift such a ban as it deemed fit. Sometimes, *iban ison idung* could donate or lend money to the village council for developmental purposes. The group had a head known as *eka iban idung* (Ekong, 2001). In the light of functions and responsibilities exercised by these women groups, it is clear that the age grades (including the sex groups) formed an important chain in the machinery of government in rural communities in Ibibioland, and without them, the government could not function effectively (Talbot, 1926).

(c) Ebre Society

The *Ebre* society was a social institution made up of married women, which aimed at eradicating social ills that could bring shame and misdemeanour to womanhood (Edemekong, 2000). Forde and Jones (1962) viewed their role in the society to include the control of moral standard of the unmarried girls, supervising the "fattening home" and other ceremonies concerning them. These set of women were closely tied to the traditional cultural belief of the community and did not allow external influence such as Christianity to impede their traditional cultural practices.

Ebre cult was also a secret social institution which abhorred its members from divulging the secrets of the society. Also, the society was significantly noted for its high moral attainment and weighed the ethical conducts of women in the society. Thus, discipline and high moral conduct were expected from members who were supposed to correct the community. In this effect the society had the power to stop women of doubtful characters from going to some places, like the market; or attending other social functions while also sometimes serving as arbitration panel between quarrelling women in the society.

The annual activities of the *ebre* society known as the *mbek ebre* took place in the month of October. The activities which used to last for a day was held on *Obo* market day and men were prohibited from witnessing the activities as special routes were provided for men going to

the market. Like other secret societies, the activities involved rituals, and sacrifices, taboos and rules. A breach of any of the rules was punishable and offenders were subject to the payment of stipulated fines (Akpan, 2016).

(d) Mbopo (Fattening Institution)

In order to keep the younger generation chaste and virtuous, the family saw to it that young men married quite early and girls prepared specially for marriage when due. The system of fattening girls in readiness for marriage was very relevant in the Ibibio traditional society. However, the attitudes created by modernization and Western education have now made the fattening room non-mandatory and irrelevant (Akpan, 2016).

The prospect of the fattening room imposed a lot of restraint on the conduct of youth, and forestalled the type of free experimentation with sex that is rampant today. Girls entered the fattening room between the ages fourteen and sixteen, when the sexual urge that accompanied adolescence was becoming a problem. Before settling into fattening process, elderly women tested the novice for virginity. If it was found to be “virgo-intacta”, the process was commenced. If it was found that she had had a pre-fattening sex experience, she was ignominiously dismissed from the fattening room and therefore forfeited the chance of winning a good husband. Such ignominy was shared by her parents; especially her mother. Consequently, her unchaste condition became the subject of abusive songs throughout the community, and members of the *ekpo nyoho* harassed and embarrassed her and her mother thereafter (Esen, 1980).

The fattening room itself was an agency for formal education. The young girl was given formal instruction on sexual hygiene, marriage and its responsibilities, child-birth and child care, “wife-craft”, cooking and other relevant matters. Meanwhile, she was well fed so that after the fattening period, she would emerge plump, beautiful and very desirable (Esen, 1980). The *actual celebration of the mbopo* institution known as, *usoro mbopo* took place a week after the formal traditional activities of *ebre* had ended in the month of October. During this celebration, the *mbopo* came out of the fattening room and that signified the end of the fattening process. From the fattening room, the *mbopo* was taken to traditional Public Square for actual celebration. Tradition demanded that the *mbopo* must be naked with some traditional “noise making” cymbals tied round her waist. The rationale behind this mode of appearance of *mbopo* was to prove her innocence to the community and made people believe that she never had an affair with a man before. The *mbopo* also had small round bracelets that covered her legs up to the knees. Her hair was weaved in a peculiar way, and small beads were also fixed on her hair. She was armed with a traditional horn which she would blow occasionally (Etukudo, 1986).

Obviously, the *mbopo* institution seemed to have been very useful in influencing the lives of youth’s most especially young girls of marriage age. The institution contributed significantly in checking the moral laxity and decadence in the society so that male suitors could marry a wife who was well cultured and good mannered (Akpan, 2016).

(vi) Mbiam

Mbiam (weirdly referred to as juju), on which people swore, was an important instrument of social control and governance in the traditional Ibibio society. The success of the traditional system depended to a greater extent on belief in the potency of *mbiam*. Before the spread of Christianity, *mbiam* was commonly accepted by most Ibibio people and to this extent, the bribing of judges and pervasion of justice were rare because, beside asking the accused to declare himself innocent of the crime, members of the family were asked in cases of doubt to swear in

such a way that the penalty inflicted by *mbiam* might extend to the whole family, if they swore falsely. In most cases, the whole family preferred declaring the accused guilty and paying the fine or fines imposed on him, to swearing to *mbiam*, when they knew that *mbiam* would kill them too (Offiong, 1991).

Every Community or society faces the task of getting individuals and groups to adhere to the normative behaviours and standards of any group they belong. As noted earlier, in the traditional Ibibio society, raw physical force exercised by *ekpo* was one of the means of checking deviant behaviours. Other means included belief in the benevolence and malevolence of ancestors, gossip, ridicule, exile, slavery and *mbiam*. *Mbiam* being a magically potent object used in oath taking and in fortifying one's property against thieves, had the supernatural ability to detect the innocent and the guilty as well as punish the offender through such ailments as whooping cough, paralysis, dysentery and death. *Mbiam* could be liquid, sacred drum, certain leaves, human blood or the Bible and cross (Offiong, 1991).

The three main ways in which *mbiam* was used included property fortification, settlement of disputes and determination of innocence and guilt. Since the belief in witchcraft remained strong, accusations and suspicion continued unabated. Under this situation, *mbiam* played a very important role in detecting witches and punishing them. Often, a house with roof was built and all the bottles and other containers of *mbiam* were stored there. Certain observances, for example, sacrifices, requiring egg, chicken, goat, ram and so on were made at the appearance of the new moon. Other observances included forbidding menstruating women and parents of twins to pass near *mbiam* house, the practice varied from *mbiam* to *mbiam*. In some places, a priest of *mbiam* was required to carry out the ritual as a full-time job. In the past, human being were sacrificed to certain *mbiam* at intervals of every three, seven or twelve years, thus, a typical *mbiam* house was littered with human skulls. At times, it was a requirement that when *mbiam* kills the culprit he or she must be beheaded. Some skulls were attached to the bottles containing the *mbiam*; a very frightful sight (Offiong, 1991).

One way to demonstrate one's innocence if accused of being a witch, was by swearing on *mbiam* as the accuser must provide the *mbiam* to be taken by the accused after he approached the person or family believed to have the most lethal type of *mbiam* and paid the required fees. On the appointed day, the *mbiam* was brought to an agreed place and usually, sacrifices were performed before the accused took the oath. Often, the owner of the *mbiam* was given another *Mbiam* to swear that he would not trick the accuser by secretly neutralizing the *mbiam* upon the receipt of bribe from the accused and also that the *mbiam* he brought was the real one. Certain *mbiam* required that the accused should stand naked during the swearing, and this was always religiously complied with (Udo, 1983).

Certain *mbiam*, like *mbiam Nko*, forbade people to eat any overnight food. The accused was provided with the statement that he or she uttered before the *mbiam* while a small quantity of *mbiam* (in case of liquid) was placed in a cup, often a calabash or gourd, and the accused drank it. Once the accused had taken it without suffering ill effects he or she was cleared of the accusation, hence the general belief in the potency of *mbiam*. So before the accused took the oath he or she was exhaustively interrogated by close relatives and friends; and urged to confess if indeed he or she was guilty. This interrogation became very necessary when the accuser demanded that the accused also ask the *mbiam* to kill other members of his or her own family (Offiong, 1991).

Conclusion

The Ibibio traditional society like other African societies functioned effectively because of the relevant system of governmental institutions that were evolved in administering its day to day affairs. The Ibibio evolved a system of control through the family heads and elders. The system was a patriarchal form of government (Esema, 2002). The pyramidal hierarchy of structure that operated started with the man and his basic family up to the clan level. As discussed, the people had some well-established social institutions that were used to enhance governance. The institutions enforced law and order which engendered peace and enhance the stability of the society.

After the pre-colonial period and the resultant spread of foreign influence, the social life of the people began to face the pressure of modernization. The foreign influence acts as a catalyst, creating room for a rapid process of social change. For instance, with the whole world being reduced into a “global village” by the strong influence of Information Communication Technology (ICT), the Ibibio society has changed tremendously; the people now live in cities and rural communities with electricity and assorted communication gadgets. The spread of Christianity directly impinged on the existing social institutions discussed and its extinction in most areas of Ibibioland. Also, the development of towns has caused the destruction of shrines, while modern law enforcement agencies have dwarfed the influence of the traditional methods of law enforcement. However, even though the Western type of law and public governance have been entrenched vices, such as corruption, kidnapping, armed robbery and so on have become very prevalent in the society, quite unlike what was obtainable in the Ibibio traditional society. This unfortunate scenario calls for the integration of some of the institutions, particularly the involvement of selected elders with requisite knowledge in governance as was previously achievable.

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